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Humor and Intellectual Identity Construction in Cynthia Ozick's Short Fiction

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Abstract

Cynthia Ozick, with her keen insight and sharp wit, has created many impressive images of intellectuals. Through the analysis of linguistic humor and situational humor in Ozick's humorous characterization of Jewish intellectuals; as well as the exploration of Ozick's playful manipulation of embedded narrative structure in her fiction, this thesis argues that Ozick, with her employment of humor in both story and narrative layer, reconsiders and criticizes some fundamental weakness and characteristic flaws of Jewish intellectuals in their various cultural interaction. While, at the same time, her criticism humor carries her effort on the preservation of Jewish identity and embodies her understanding and sympathy of the intellectual in their cultural dilemmas.

Key words: Linguistic humor; Situational humor; Humorous characterization; Embedded narrative; Intellectual identity; Jewish culture

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INTRODUCTION

Cynthia Ozick is a traditional Jewish writer, who writes with wit and humor different types of Jew and explores in depth the different dimensions of Jew's life. In her playful manipulation of the embedded narrative in her short fiction, Ozick characterizes a group of Jewish

intellectuals with linguistic as well as situational humor. And through making fun of these intellectuals, Ozick reveals the weakness and faults embodied in them. Nevertheless, this mocking and criticizing humor also bears Ozick's understanding of the Jewish intellectuals in their cultural dilemma. Hence, Ozick actually uses humor to make a sympathetic correction of the faults of the Jewish intellectuals in their cultural dilemma and thus to construct a more mature and cohesive Jewish intellectual identity.

1. HUMOROUS CHARACTERIZATION OF JEWISH INTELLECTUALS

1.1 Linguistic Humor in the Portrait of the Intellectuals

In the light of Henri Bergson's comment on humor, "most of the varieties of the comic" are "produced through the medium of language" (2008, p. 33), Cynthia Ozick also creates impressive comic effect in her portrait of the Jewish intellectual through her ingenious employment of words and phrases. In "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" which is a story centers on the protagonist Edelshtein's illusionary pursuit of literary fame, verbal humor permeates even in the beginning of the story where the narrator introduces Edelshtein as "an American for forty years", and a ravenous yet resentful reader of novels "by writers of Jewish extraction", because in Edelshtein's point of view, these writers are "puerile, vicious, pitiable, ignorant, contemptible, above all stupid" (Ozick, 1971, p. 41), and he accuses them of "Amerikaner-geboren", who "spawned in America, pogroms a rumor, mamaloshen a stranger, history a vacuum" (Ozick, 1971, p.41). On the one hand, just as Henri Bergson points out, comic meaning is invariably obtained when a character always expresses himself in some obsolete formulas and stereotyped phrases (2008, p.35), Edelshtein, a Jewish immigrant living in America for almost forty years, still

bursts out streams of Yiddish from time to time, which brings an alienating comic effect when these unfamiliar Yiddish terms lined up with the standard English. Besides, the ironic humor caused by the series of words “puerile, vicious, pitiable, ignorant, contemptible, stupid” could be much strengthened with the progression of the plot when the reader finds out it is Edelshtein himself that is too ignorant and arrogant to admit his envy for other academic celebrity. And among the “writers of Jewish extraction”, the one Edelshtein takes the most aversion to is Ostrover, who is named by Edelshtein as “der chaser” (pig) (Ozick, 1971, p.46) because of Ostrover’s white skin. Besides, he also calls Ostrover “shed” (devil) as well as “Yankee Doodle” for Ostrover’s real name is Yankel Ostrover (Ozick, 1971, p.46). “To mix up a series of words so that their respective meanings jostle one another, is invariably comic” (Bergson, 2008, p.37). So, the reciprocal juxtaposition of Ostrover’s name--Yankel and the pejorative word—YanKee just easily triggers the reader’s laughter while hilariously expresses the incompatibility between Edelshtein and his fellow intellectual. Edelshtein’s intense hatred for Ostrover even imperils Ostrover’s wife whom Edelshtein regards as “no more impressive than a pot of stale fish” and whose Yiddish Edelshtein claims “had an unpleasant gargling Galician” and whose vocabulary he evaluates “was a thin soup” (Ozick, 1971, p.47). “What causes laughter is a perception of something incongruous” (Morreall, 2009, p.10). So, the linguistic incongruity evoked by Edelshtein’s disparagement of one person with a battery of pabular expression is by all means laughable. However, the most essential humor actually results from the incongruity between Edelshtein’s intellectual identity, who is a sixty-seven poet and his apparent childishness such as his insulting nicknames and degraded evaluation against others.

Ozick produces much laughter in her portrait of the ludicrous and childish Edelshtein through a series of linguistic operation including the employment of the unfamiliar Yiddish terms, the juxtaposition of the reciprocal yet incongruous words. Similarly, in “Usurpation”, linguistic humor not only serves to amuse the reader but also contributes to the characterization of one of her most impressive protagonist. The protagonist and narrator of “Usurpation” is a nameless female writer who is listening to a famous writer’s reading of his new story in a public hall. The distinguished writer, according to the narrator, “wore a conventional suit and tie, a conventional haircut and conventional eyeglasses. His whitening mustache made him look conventionally distinguished” (Ozick, 1976, p.132). According to Bergson, one of the most recurrent techniques used in classical comedy is repetition, and whether it is the repetition of words or events, it can always remind the audience of “something mechanical in something living”, so it is comic (2008, p.25). Hence, the narrator’s unemotional repetition of the same word “conventional”

actually produces a comic effect while implies her haughtiness with her emphasis on the ordinariness of the famous writer. Besides, after learning from the writer that the story is actually an adaption of what he has read in the newspaper, the female narrator assumes “had I only had access to a newspaper that crucial night (the *Post*, the *News*, the *Manchester Guardian*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Boston Herald Traveler*, ah, which, which? And where I was?)” (Ozick, 1976, p.134), and believes she would not only be able to write the same story but also make it “less logically decisive” (Ozick, 1976, p.134). The comic repetition of a variety of newspapers here actually reflects the female writer’s fervent desire of literary creation and literary fame. But her fervent desire gradually goes to absurdity. when the famous writer is reading his story, the narrator declares “by the third paragraph I was blind and saw nothing” and “by the fifth paragraph I recognized my story-knew it to be mine, that is, with the same indispensable familiarity I have for this round-flanked left-side molar my tongue admires” (Ozick, 1976, p.131). In M.H. Abrams’s elaboration of irony, he introduces one common literary device of irony which is the invention of a “naive hero” whose obtuseness leads his interpretation on things is to be found faults with and corrected by the knowing reader or the implied point of view of the authorial presence (1999, p.135). And in “Usurpation”, this ironic effect is much reinforced because the identity of the narrator protagonist, whose profession as the writer indicates she is by no means simple minded, thus her total nonawareness of and even the self-justified, mental plagiarism of other’s literary creation assuredly produces the absurd humor and evokes the reader’s corrective laughter. What’s more, the female narrator states “occasionally a writer will encounter a story that is his, yet is not his”, and “sometimes it happens that somebody else has written the story first. It is like being robbed of clothes you do not yet own” (Ozick, 1976, p.131). The professional gesture she assumes, the calm and seemingly reasonable tone she obtains in her statement, further strengthen the comic effect because as Bergson explains “humor is the more emphasized the deeper we go down into an evil in the most cold-blooded indifference” (2008, p.40).

The comic repetition of series of words and phrases and the artful employment of irony vividly disclose the narrator protagonist’s absurdity and haughtiness in “Usurpation”. As a matter of fact, Ozick’s exploitation of linguistic humor is not limited to the portrait of the childish poet, the absurd writer, but is also contributed to the characterization of another kind of intellectual, the Jewish rabbi. “The Pagan Rabbi” begins with a nameless narrator’s reminiscence of himself and his rabbi friend Issac Kornfeld’s earlier life after the narrator’s hearing of Isaac’s suicide. The narrator and Issac are “classmates in the rabbinical seminary” and their fathers are rabbis and the solid guard of traditional Judaism. According to the narrator, the fathers believe “philosophy is an

abomination” (Ozick, 1971, p.3). So, when Isaac disagrees with his father holding “idolatry is the abomination, not philosophy”, his father refutes “the latter is the corridor to the former” (Ozick, 1971, p.3); and when the narrator later withdraws from the seminary and marries a Non-Jewish, the narrator’s father warns him “if you share a bed with a Puritan you’ll come into it cold and you’ll go out of it cold” (Ozick, 1971, p.6). Drawing on Bergson’s analysis of linguistic humor in which he thinks “a comic effect is obtained whenever we pretend to take literally an expression which was used figuratively”, or when we focus on “the material aspect of a metaphor, the idea expressed becomes comic” (2008, p.36), the comic effect is craftily achieved when the misleading effect of philosophy is compared as the physical “corridor” and when the threatening danger of heresy is described as “cold”. Besides, what enhances humor is that the two fathers not only have different opinions with their sons but also, they are in competition with each other. “They vied with one another in demonstrations of charitableness, in the number of their adherents” (Ozick, 1971, p.3). Therefore, when Isaac’s stickness to Judaism finally makes him a distinguished rabbi, his father “crowed like a passionate rooster, and packed his wife and himself off to the Holy Land to boast on the holy soil” (Ozick, 1971, p.8). However, the narrator’s withdraw from rabbinical seminar and his marriage with a Puritan is took by his father “as an occasion for declaring me as one dead” in “his public defeat”, while Isaac’s father regards it as “his private triumph over my father” and comes to watch the narrator’s father mourn, being “secretly satisfied, though aloud he grieved for all apostates”(Ozick, 1971, p.6). The puerile competition between the two rabbis triggers much laughter because the transportation of words and expressions from one key to another including the reversal of the solemn to the familiar, the dignified to the trivial is always comic (Bergson, 2008, p.39). Hence, the seriousness of the difference in narrator’s and Isaac’s choices of Jewish tradition is actually reflected in the childish competition between the rabbi fathers, and this inversion from the solemn to the ridicule actually produces the comic effect which somehow mediates the weight of such topics as religious apostasy and cultural conflicts.

Ozick’s series of linguistic operation including the comic juxtaposition of words, repetition, irony and the inversion of expressions, not only produce much humor in the characterization of different intellectuals, but also reveal their laughable weakness such as the arrogance of the poet, the absurdity of the writer as well as the puerility of the rabbi.

1.2 Situational Humor in the Portrait of Intellectuals

In addition to the verbal humor, situational humor also contributes to Ozick’s humorous characterization of Jewish intellectuals, just as Bergson says “the comic

in words follows closely on the comic in situation and is finally merged, along with the latter, in the comic in character” (2008, p.41). Joseph Dorinson once defines Jewish humor as a “pervasive skepticism” and he lists some salient features of Jewish humor including “sharp self-criticism of one’s own people”, “explosive truths” (1998, p.29). Similar to Joseph Dorinson’s exploration of Jewish humor, Ozick being a Jewish writer, also employs humor to depict and disclose some fundamental flaws and weakness of her characters in a series of comic events.

In “Envy; or, Yiddish in America” the protagonist Edelshtein is a sixty-seven Jewish American immigrant and an obscure poet who only writes in Yiddish. Different from him, his counterpart Ostrover whose Yiddish work is translated to English and then achieves national, international fame. And Edelshtein who can’t figure out “why only Ostrover?” (Ozick, 1971, p.51), composes a letter to Ostrover’s publishers in which he negates their choice of Ostrover “you publish only one Yiddish writer, not even a poet, only a story-writer” and recommends himself “others also exist without notice being bothered [.....] I myself am the author and also publisher of four tomes of poetry [.....] Please inform me if you will be willing to provide me with a translator for these very worthwhile pieces of hidden writings” (Ozick, 1971, p.53). However, his fervent, long letter is replied with few lines in the same week and it says “though your poetry may well be of the quality you claim for it, practically speaking, reputation must precede translation” (Ozick, 1971, p.53). “A comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious.” (Bergson, 2008, p.6). Thus, Edelshtein’s self-righteous excellency and his ignorance of his own literary incompetence just makes him laughable. What makes the laughter louder is Edelshtein’s childish reply letter to the publishers in which he writes “for you Yiddish has no existence! [.....] You sign yourself “yours.” You are not mine and I’m not Yours!” (Ozick, 1971, p.53) and he only signs “Sincerely” without “yours” in the closing. The strike from the publisher doesn’t extinguish Edelshtein’s fervent dream of being well-noticed as a Yiddish writer, so he “began to search in earnest for a translator” (Ozick, 1971, p.54). Once again, he receives a rejection from Ostrover’s translator who writes “since he [Ostrover] is the only one they want to print he is the only one worth translating. Suppose I translated one of your nice little love songs? Would anyone buy it? Foolishness even to ask” (Ozick, 1971, p.54). Similarly, the translator’s refusal doesn’t damp down Edelshtein, and he puts his final hope on the young Hannah, a second generation of Jewish immigrant who speaks both Yiddish and English. He persuades Hannah to be the savior of Yiddish by being his translator “You’ll save Yiddish, you will be like a Messiah to a whole generation [.....] translate me, lift me out of the ghetto, it’s my life that’s hanging on you!” (Ozick, 1971, p.94). However, Hannah

turns him down again by saying "it isn't a translator you're after, it's someone's soul" (Ozick, 1971, p.94) and "you don't interest me. I would have to be interested" (Ozick, 1971, p.99). Edelshtein's continuous attempt of getting fame as a Yiddish poet and the consequent series of rejection he receives from the publisher, the translator and his compatriot actually constitute the classical comic model which Bergson describes as "Jack in the box" -- an idea is like a spring when it is first expressed then repressed, and then expressed again (2008, p.23). And in this succession of comic scenes, Edelshtein, the unlucky protagonist actually belongs to the type character in the traditional Jewish humor, the schlemiel, who "is a loser", "the butt of the joke" and "who lacks adaptability and is incapable of the sort of accommodation the culture demands" (Boyer, 1993, p.6). Superficially, Edelshtein is a laughable schlemiel because he fails to adapt to the mainstream culture where English rather than Yiddish is welcomed. However, the more profound laughter comes from his failure to recognize his obscurity owing much to his literary incompetence rather than the language and his failure to admit his extremity and hypocrisy of cursing the Western civilization as "pod of muck" while using the noble excuse of saving Yiddish to cover up his personal desire to become literary famous in the new world, which is manifested when Edelshtein says in his illusion to Ostrover "I want to be a Gentile like you" (Ozick, 1971, p.69). Hence Ozick uses humor to laugh at and to reconsider the Jewishness represented by Jews like Edelshtein who is too hateful to other culture while less genuine to Jewish tradition. However, though the arrogance and the hypocrisy of Edelshtein is attacked, through his series of comic yet unfulfilled attempts, one undeniable fact reflected in the story is that Yiddish is indeed in a declining circumstance. Therefore, Ozick's self-criticism humor also contributes to the attention and preservation of Jewish tradition and culture.

Just as Sarah Blacher Cohen notes, one obvious moral blemish of Ozick's characters is "affectation" and most of these characters are tainted with "intellectual pomposity and artistic hubris" (1994, p.8), Edelshtein belongs to this category and his pretension is attacked through Ozick's dissecting humor as previously discussed. And in "Usurpation", the similar pretentious and presumptuous protagonist is also laughed at in a series of humorous situations. Like the obscure Edelshtein, the protagonist in "Usurpation" is also an unknown writer who casts her envy on her famous counterpart. When listening to a famous writer's reading of his new story which is about a teacher being deceived by a magic crown, the protagonist believes the story should belong to her and charges the writer as "usurper" saying "seeing the usurper on the stage caressing the manuscript that, in its deepest turning, was meant to be yours [...] it seems unjust. There is no way to prevent him" (Ozick, 1976, p.131). "Observation of the imperfection and defects of others and the perception of ourselves' superiority

can trigger our laughter" (Morreall, 2009, p.6). So, the reader's easy recognition of the apparent absurdity and unreasonableness of the protagonist can make the latter become the object of their superior laughter. And after the writer finishes reading his story, the protagonist "jumped" from her seat, "rose like a heated gas, feeling insubstantial, and went to press [her] head against the cold side wall along the aisle" (Ozick, 1976, p.136). And with her "skull drilled into the wall", she thinks "my brain was all gas, it shuddered with envy [.....] How I wished it was I who had come upon the silver crown" (Ozick, 1976, p.136). In Henri Bergson's comic theory, he mentions "the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (2008, p.11), hence, the stiffening and the clumsiness of the protagonist's movement who drills herself like a machine into the wall and the paralysis of her mind which has been burned out by her envy just makes herself absurdly humorous. And what happens next makes the humor magic and unrealistic. Just when the protagonist is pressing the wall, she "saw the face of a goat" and it "was thin, white, blurry-eyed" (Ozick, 1976, p.135). What's more fantastic is that the goat wants academic communication and has story which he wants the protagonist can help give it to the famous writer to review. And when the protagonist tries to refuse the goat and says its work doesn't deserve the distinguished writer's attention and the writer "has better things to do", the goat retorts "then let me at least have yours" (Ozick, 1976, p.138), then the protagonist takes home its story to read. "some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations, and when we have experienced such sense of incongruity, it can trigger our laughter" (Morreall, 2009, p.11). Here, the talking goat is something contrary to the reader's normal mental pattern, whereas, its literary capability and its wit to satirize the protagonist can particularly burst out a sense of unrealistic humor. The protagonist reads the goat's story which is about a student's pursuit of knowledge from a religious writer, but she changes it "with [her] own version" (Ozick, 1976, p.143) by killing the student with a magic crown. And in terms of her modification, the protagonist expresses she does it "to punish" by "transmuting piety into magic" because the goat writes about "religion" (Ozick, 1976, p.158). "A person is never ridiculous except through some mental attribute resembling absent-mindedness" (Bergson, 2008, p.52). So, the protagonist brings much laughter because her fundamental absent-mindedness on the one hand leads her to boast her plagiarism of the goat's story as her punishment for the goat which reflects her ridiculous pretension, and on the other hand, it reduces her to become an absurd grotesque in her dealing with the relation between creation and creator or the magic and the religion. According to the traditional Judaism, there is only one true creator who should be worshipped—the

God, so anything instead of God and any practices verging on creating, such as art creation, is idolatry which is to be forbidden. Just as Timothy Parrish concludes most of Ozick's characters "find themselves almost literally torn between their desire to create and the injunction not to be idolaters" (2001, p.440), the protagonist in "Usurpation" is also encountered with the issue of idolatry. Even Ozick herself makes clear in the preface of *Bloodshed* that "usurpation is a story written against story writing. It is against magic and mystification [...] against idolatry. It is an invention directed against inventing" (11). And it is the contradiction between the protagonist's desire of artistic creation and her identity of being a Jew that drives her to be absurdly humorous: to distort the goat's religious story to be magic, to claim herself the creator of another writer's magic story because "how I wished to write a story containing that unholy sound" (Ozick, 1976, p.136). Hence, though Ozick's humor laughs at the artistic pretension and absurdity of the protagonist, at the same time, it also reflects the complexity of idolatry that all Jewish artists encounter, just as Deborah H. Weiner says, "the dilemma of being a writer in love with language and remaining a Jew is never reconciled for Ozick [...] She is an idolator, she knows it, and yet she continues to write. It is a balancing act; it is a contradiction" (1983, p.190). Thus, this criticism humor actually "arose from a sense of identification and an understanding" (Ziv, 1998, p.51) and it contains Ozick's empathy with the protagonist, with all the Jewish writer.

Similarly, in "The Pagan Rabbi", the Jewish intellectuals are also portrayed as laughable for their flippancy and absurdity, and penetrating the laughter, Ozick's humor actually reflects the cultural conflicts these characters undergo. "The divisions between holy and pagan, nature and study, Pan and Moses are the primary tension of Ozick's fiction" (Cooper, 2000, p.183), and "The Pagan Rabbi" also bears no exception. The narrator "I" of the story and the character Isaac Kornfeld are classmates in the same rabbinical seminary where the father of them are both rabbis. But later the nameless narrator withdraws from the seminary and becomes an atheist while Isaac publishes his "remarkable collection of responsa" and becomes a rabbi and "Professor of Mishnaic History" (Ozick, 1971, p.8). As for this, the narrator once says to Isaac "Torah tells that an illustrious man doesn't have an illustrious son. Otherwise he wouldn't be humble like other people [...] my father always believed he was more illustrious than anybody [...] therefore, what chance did I have? A nincompoop and no sitzfleisch" (Ozick *Pagan*, 6). Irony is what "the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed" (Abrams, 1999, p.135), hence the narrator's ironic bantering with the serious Jewish Torah not only dissolves himself as an apostate but also mediates the weight of cultural conflicts. Though as the narrator says "our ways were too disparate", he and Isaac are still in good terms and keep correspondence for years in which "we

bantered back and forth" (Ozick, 1971, p.9). Hence, when the narrator "heard that Isaac, a man of piety and brains, had hanged himself in the public park", he "journeyed out to see the tree" (Ozick, 1971, p.3). And the tree is "alone in a long rough meadow" which "covered half the city's turd" (Ozick, 1971, p.4). Thus, the narrator marvels "all that holy genius and intellectual surprise should in the end be raised no higher than the next-to-lowest limb of a delicate young oak" (Ozick, 1971, p.4). The recognition of the incongruity which is "something unexpected, out of context, inappropriate, unreasonable, illogical, exaggerated" (McGhee, 1979, p.10) is laughable. So, the unexpected fact that a distinguished Jewish rabbi should commit suicide with his prayer shawl which is forbidden in Judaism, together with the inappropriateness that the solemnity of a rabbi's death is somehow related to something degraded, the tree he hangs himself is beside a dirty pond full of the city's turd, just brings about a kind of uncomfortable humor to the reader. Later, the narrator goes to make condolence to Isaac's widow Sheindel, who tells the narrator that Isaac behaves strange lately: he goes to the park every day after class and "six, seven in the morning he came home" (Ozick, 1971, p.15). Besides, Sheindel shares a letter the police have found in the park with the narrator in which Isaac writes down what he has done in the park:

I reached to the lowest branch and plucked a leaf and made my tongue travel meditatively along its periphery to assess its shape [...] I then placed one hand in the bifurcation of that lowest limb [...] "Come, come," I called aloud to Nature. "Come," I called, "couple with me, as thou didst with Cadmus, Rhoecus, Tithonus, Endymion [...] a marvelous voluptuousness did not leave my body; sensual exultations of a wholly supreme and paradisaal order, unlike anything our poets have ever defined, both flared and were intensely satisfied in the same moment.

(Ozick, 1971, p.29)

Bergson has summarized comic absurdity is of the same nature as that of dreams, in which the dreamer "is conscious of speaking and acting as usual, but he speaks of himself as a stranger with whom he has nothing in common" (2008, p.58). In the above scene, the rabbi Isaac is characterized as absurdly humorous because his grotesque behavior of licking and caressing the tree and his bewildering thought of coupling with a tree, which is not in the least suitable for any reasonable ordinary, not to speak of a distinguished rabbi. And the illusionary rabbi himself also has not realized his inappropriateness and flippancy, his seemingly fervency just make the humor more absurd and louder. However, the rabbi records in his letter that "if only I could couple with one of the free souls, the strengthen of the connection would likely wrest my own soul from my body-seize it, as if by a tongs, draw it out, so to say, to its own freedom" (Ozick, 1971, p.28), hence the humor aroused by the rabbi's absurdity actually reflect the cultural conflicts he undergoes, who wants to cast off Judaism constraints and pursues freedom by throwing himself into the nature, as Kremer says the one "struggling with the sensual lures

of Pan and the moral imperatives of Moses" (1987, p.25). Though the rabbi's attempts of attaining freedom through coupling with a tree is absurd and laughed, Ozick's humor also renders layers of sympathy and understanding to the character in his anxiety of cultural conflicts, just as the narrator says to Sheindel after their reading of the letter, "pity him" (Ozick, 1971, p.37).

2. HUMOR AND JEWISH INTELLECTUALS IN EMBEDDED NARRATIVE

In Emanuel Goldsmith's research of the traditional Jewish humor, he puts forward that the root of Jewish humor comes from the Jewish community where the preacher "spiced their discourses with witty remarks and concocted parables and stories within stories to illustrate their moral preachments" (1993, p.22). And Ozick also carries forward some characteristic features of the traditional Jewish humor, especially the "stories within stories" narrative structure. The "story within story" structure has attracted some attention from the narratologist and they label the structure also as "Chinese box", "Russian doll" or "embedded" narrative (Nelles, 1992, p.79) which refers to a kind of stratification of narrative levels. In the first or highest narrative, a character whose actions are the object of narration can in turn himself narrate a new story; in this case, the first/highest narrative is called framing narrative, while the story narrated by the character is called embedded narrative which is subordinated or embedded in the framing narrative. And because within the character's story, there may be another character who narrates another story, and so it could be a second, a third embedded narrative which just like the endless Chinese box (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005, pp.93-94). What's more, according to Gerard Genette, the transgression from one narrative level to another, whether it is the narrator or the narrate of the embedded narrative into the framing narrative, or the inverse, it can "produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical or fantastic" (1980, p.235). And in Ozick's fiction, the employment of the embedded narrative and the playful transgression between different narrative levels not only produces a comic effect, but also carries on her thematic concern in the construction of Jewish intellectual identity.

In "Envy; or, Yiddish in America", the framing narrative is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator who records the main character Edelshtein's early life in Russia, his envy against Ostrover and his series of unfulfilled attempts to get literary fame as a Yiddish writer. And this framing narrative is embedded a story narrated by character Ostover, who tells his new story in a public reading when Edelshtein is also present. The story is about a deal between Satan and an obscure poet. The poet blames his obscurity to language: "the only language I can write is Zwrldish. Unfortunately, no one is left in the world who can read Zwrldish. That is my burden" (Ozick, 1971, p.59). So, in order to gain fame,

he wants to trade his soul to Satan for a more popular language. Though Satan informs the poet "the trouble lies in your talent" (Ozick, 1971, p.59), the poet doesn't think so. So, Satan gives the poet the capability to write in fluent French and thus takes a quarter of his soul, but the poet remains obscure and no publisher wants him. And after the continuous failure with Armenian, Italian and so on, Satan owns the entire soul of the obscure poet and takes him to the hell where the poet can only "write for oblivion" (Ozick, 1971, p.59). Bergson once concludes one way to produce comedy is to "bring a group of characters, act after act, into the most varied surroundings, so as to reproduce, under ever fresh circumstances, one and the same series of incidents or accidents more or less symmetrically identical" (2008, p.29). Hence the symmetry between Edelshtein and the obscure poet, the purposeful analogy between the framing and the embedded narrative just gives out the satirical humor to disclose the ignorance and absentmindedness of Edelshtein. Besides, since the form of embedded narrative could vary differently from the story told by a character to the dream, the illusion or the letter one narrates (Genette, 1980, p.238-239), there are also other embedded narratives presented as letter in the basic framing narrative, for example the length letter written by Edelshtein. In one of Edelshtein's letter to Hannah, the young Jewish American, whom he wants to persuade to be his translator, he writes "the sound of a dead language on a live girl's tongue! [...] youth itself is nothing unless it keeps its promise to grow old. Hannah, carry fathers and uncles into the future with you. Do this. Whoever forgets Yiddish courts amnesia of history [...]" (Ozick, 1971, p.74). However, different from the fervent tone of character Edelshtein, the extradiegetic narrator in the framing narrative coldly comments right after the closure of the letter "he knew he lied [...]" Oratory and declamation. A speech. A lecture. His cry was ego and more ego. His own stew, foul. Whoever mourns the dead mourns himself" (Ozick, 1971, p.75). Hence the incongruity between the character Edelshtein and the extradiegetic narrator once again creates a sense of colliding humor which standouts the hypocrisy of Edelshtein for making profit for himself on the pretext of cultural preservation. Nevertheless, there are also other embedded narrative narrated by other characters, like the letter Ostrover's translator replies Edelshtein who writes "I tell you his [Ostrover] Yiddish doesn't matter. Nobody's Yiddish matters" (Ozick, 1971, p.56), which indicates the decline of Yiddish in the new world. So, it is true that Edelshtein's obscurity comes largely from his personal incapability, however, another contributing factor may also be the fact that Yiddish is fading. Hence, through the manipulation of and the purposeful collision between different narrative levels, Ozick using humor not only discloses the weakness, the hypocrisy of the Jewish intellectual, but also implies the distress of cultural recession.

In "Usurpation", the transgression between different

narrative levels, and the interweaving of reality and unreality just produce one kind of comic dazzling. In the framing narrative, the first-person character narrator "I" tells her mental experiences when she hears a famous writer's public reading of his new story, which constitutes the first embedded narrative. The story is named "the magic crown" and is about a teacher who is tricked by a rabbi with his "magic" crown and according to the famous writer, the story is sourced from the news he once read that a fraud rabbi is put in the jail for his tricks. When the writer finishes telling his story, the narration comes back to the framing narrative where the narrator exclaims "how I wished it was I who had come upon the silver crown" (Ozick, 1976, p.134) and then she meets a goat who offers its story to her to read and claims itself is the cousin of the fraud rabbi's wife. In this way, the narrative levels are entangled and a kind of fanciful humor is created. Then, another embedded narrative occurs with the narration of the goat's story, which records a young student's consultation from a famous religious writer about how to achieve his academic ambition and the writer tells him to conceal it. And during this narrating course, the female narrator "I" jumps in and comments "here I will interrupt the goat's story to apologize. I would not be candid if I did not confess that I am writing it [...] Oh, the goat's was boring! So, going on with my own version" (Ozick, 1976, p.143). So, the narrator changes the goat's story by offering a magic crown from the famous writer to the youth who then will inherit the crown giver's literary power, but finally the youth can't bear the burden of the crown and dies. And with the death of the young student, this embedded narrative comes back to the framing level where the character narrator "I" after reading the goat's story goes to visit the goat and its cousin, the fraud rabbi's wife. As the narrator says "I had come because of the crown; I was in the pursuit of the crown" (Ozick, 1976, p.161), so after her repeated request, she is offered the crown and when she is asked to choose between "the Creator or the creature"; "the Name of Names or Apollo", she chooses "Apollo" (Ozick, 1976, p.176) and says "when we enter paradise there will be a cage for story writers, who will be taught as follows: All that is not Law is levity" (Ozick, 1976, p.177), hereto, the whole story officially ends with the interlacing of different narrative levels. To repeat and to mix series of events in different contexts so that their respective meanings jostling each other, is comic (Bergson, 2008, p.37). Hence, the transgression of the character from one narrative level to another, the integration between reality and unreality, the repeated action of storytelling and the recurrent symbol of magic crown in multiple narratives just generates a strong sense of fantastic humor and gives out much thematic implication. In the first embedded story, the famous writer's story is about a "magic crown"; in the narrator's rewriting of the goat's story, she invents a magic crown to punish the goat's piety; in the finality

she then wears a crown. Hence, penetrating this comic narrative labyrinth, it is Ozick's serious consideration of what imagination and magic means for a Jewish writer. Though the narrator in the story openly claims that "magic, I admit it, is what I lust after [...] I am drawn to what is forbidden. [...] The Jews have no magic" (Ozick, 1976, p.134), just as her rewriting of the goat's story: the youth finally dies due to the unbearable burden of the crown; and the commandment she cites after her choice of the crown "all that is not Law is levity", the narrator still remains a Jew in deep though she may be the audacious one, which is also the true portrayal of Ozick, who writes with imagination but only writes about Jew.

In "Usurpation" the playful manipulation of multiple narrative levels indicates the ambiguity and complexity of Jewish intellectual's attitude to the relation between creation and Creator, similarly, in "The Pagan Rabbi", the dynamic of the embedded narrative not only creates a sense of incongruous humor but also reflects the intellectual's struggling in cultural conflicts. The framing narrative is about the first-person character narrator's recollection of him and Isaac's earlier life after he hears the death of Isaac and his interaction with Isaac's wife Sheindel when he goes to make condolence. In this framing narrative, a second narrative appears in the form of a letter which is Isaac's narration of his experience in his solitary midnight walking in the park including his encounter with the mysterious dryad. What's more, this second narrative is embedded with another narrative which is the dryad's telling of the true sight of Isaac's soul. First of all, the narrator and Sheindel's reading and comment on Isaac's letter are progressed with the content of the letter, which constitutes the interweaving of the framing narrative and the first embedded narrative:

Holy life subsists even in the stone, even in the bones of dead dogs and dead men. Hence in God's fecundating Creation there is no possibility of Idolatry [...] To see the soul, to confront it [...]

"Stop!" I cried.

"I will not," said the widow.

[...]

"Sheindel," I said, "I beg you, don't destroy a dead man's honor.

Don't look at this thing again."

"I don't destroy his honor. He had none."

[...]

Her eyes returned without hesitation on their task. She commenced: "All these truths I learned only gradually, against my will and desire. Our teachers Moses did not speak of them [...]" (Ozick, 1971, p.22)

"The object of laughter is two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage" (Morreall, 2009, p.12), hence, the transgression between different narrative levels and their embodying incongruity between the unorthodoxy of the rabbi's letter and the orthodoxy of the two readers just produces an unsettling humor which indicates cultural conflicts. And in the

remaining letter, Isaac tells how he meets a dryad and how "in a trance of happiness we coupled in the ditches, in the long grasses, behind a fountain" (Ozick, 1971, p.32). Here the different image of the flippant rabbi in his letter and the respected scholar in the framing narrative also gives reader a sense of humorous absurdity. In the closing part of Isaac's letter, it is another embedded story told by the dryad who describes the sight of Isaac's soul: "he is so sad! Such antique weariness broods in his face! [...] he reads the Law and breathes the dust [...] his feet are bandaged" (Ozick, 1971, p.35). After her telling, the dryad disappears, so Isaac in his illusion talks with his soul and asks him if he intended "to go with his books through the whole future without change", and his soul replies "the sound of the Law is more beautiful than the crickets [...] the taste of the Law exceeds clear water" (Ozick, 1971, p.36). In his rage, Isaac grabs and whirls around the prayer shawl of his soul, and then "wound it on my neck and in one bound came to the tree" (Ozick, 1971, p.36). "A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" (Bergson, 2008, p.31). Hence the analogy between the regretful death of a respected rabbi "at the peak of his renown" (Ozick 1971, p.4) in the framing narrative and the absurd struggling between the rabbi and his soul in this embedded narrative is just comic. Hence, in this story-within-story structure, the interweaving of reality and mystery, the coupling between the orthodox and the unorthodox, produces a crashing yet profound humor and implies Ozick's thoughts about cultural difference. Though the rabbi is presented as ridiculous and flippant in his fanciful attempts to achieve freedom, but he also bears the author's sympathy, just in the end of the story, the narrative goes back to the framing level where Sheindel comments "he who takes his own life does an abomination" while the narrator retorts "you don't pity him? You don't pity him at all?" (Ozick, 1971, p.36).

CONCLUSION

In Ozick's construction of the identity of Jewish intellectuals, she employs humor, whether it is in linguistics, in situation or in embedded narrative, to disclose and attack some characteristic flaws and weakness of these Jewish intellectuals such as the hypocrisy of the poet Edelshtein in "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" and the pretension of the female protagonist in "Usurpation" as well as the absurdity of the rabbi in "The Pagan Rabbi". And through her criticism humor, she actually delves into the issues relative to Jewish traditional culture such as the decline of Yiddish, the prohibition of idolatry, and the constraints of Judaism; and explores the anxiety and dilemma encountered by Jewish intellectuals in their dealing with these issues, hence her critiquing humor also contains much measure of understanding.

Above all, her humor represents a reconsideration as well as a restressing of Jewishness, to disclose the weakness exhibited by some Jew, to delve into their dilemma so as to enhance the cohesiveness and maturity of the Jew and to further preserve the Jewish identity.

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